

Idolatry In the Marketplace:
A Review of the Marketer's Impact on Advancing Biblical Principles

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how contemporary marketing efforts shift consumer's attention to the individual as brands make their patrons' needs supreme in many ways. People are naturally self-focused, and when organizations exploit this, it becomes a dangerous practice as it distracts us from living lives in ways that honor God. Against this background we are reminded of God's many directives regarding our temptation to worship the self. Christian marketers can advance social values and ideals that are less self-oriented and more 'God' centric. Francis Schaeffer's four standards of judgement for art can be a useful framework for this purpose. In the end, Christians, acting as "mindful marketers," are in a unique position to impact a postmodern society by aligning their campaigns with biblical principles.

“Such Christians **do not** need to be a majority in order for this influence on society to occur.”

- Francis Schaeffer¹

Introduction

The practice of marketing has experienced vast changes in the past several decades. While the focus used to be on product/service as hero, the new hero is the consumer – the buyer, influencer, or user. Overall, the marketplace has moved from a production/product focus to one centered on the consumer – the individual – the self. The marketing focus encourages organizations to zoom in on consumer needs and desires as a first step before considering product capabilities. This evolution means that instead of organizations focusing their selling efforts on the physical and emotional elements of the products and/or solutions, they elevate the consumers themselves. The consumer is the “center of their universe” and one who is being catered to across many elements of the brand experience. The self becomes a “god” of sorts to please and cajole.

The consumer has had such an intense spotlight that organizations have taken causes of social interest and turned them into platforms for consumer interaction. It means that brands have taken more of a center stage in shaping ideals than ever before. While there are many advantages to this approach for both organizations and their customers, there are obvious concerns from a biblical perspective, especially as we reflect on how humans are naturally self-focused. Consumers have tended to believe they are like “gods” – all knowing, and ever since the days in the Garden of Eden, refusing to acknowledge God’s sovereign authority.

In this paper, we will discuss the consumer-focus orientation in a postmodern world, the impact on the “self” and the implications for Christian marketers. We will dive into the many ways that marketers have endeared themselves to a self-orientation approach to consumer marketing - a shift that is harmful to our relationship with God. We offer some suggestions for Christian marketers to refocus the spotlight from the “self” to practices that honor God.

Evolution of Business Practices

From the 1880s-1920s, companies focused their efforts on the process of production. Factories were being automated, and executives recognized that they could reduce costs and outcompete rivals based on the very tangible benefit of productive efficiency. Over time, companies realized that being the cheapest and most readily available wasn’t necessarily the same as being the best. People were willing to spend money on unique items that brought them status and emotional benefits. Product differentiation was sought to appeal to the consumer. Ries and Trout became famous in marketing circles as they identified breakthrough ideas on positioning – and the battle for the consumer’s mind.² They reminded the marketer that the item being sold wasn’t nearly as important as how the consumer thought about the item. More importantly the thought process could be influenced and controlled by the brand.

As early as the sixties, marketing scholars were discussing the implications of a consumer orientation and its complexities as organizations focused on trying to understand human needs. In a *Harvard Business Review* article entitled, “No Easy Road to Marketing Orientation,” Lear reminds readers that whether a marketing focus is planned or reactive, the need for the consumer as king is critical.³

The marketing/consumer orientation and brand focus have much in common. A brand orientation represents an inside-out approach where the organization’s mission, vision and values guide brand development, setting boundaries to the extent to which firms allow customer needs to affect branding decisions.⁴ It is also seen as a more dynamic and holistic

approach than market orientation, integrating the customer's views in ways highly connected to the organization. Much has been written on this subject as organizations have acknowledged the intensity of this focus and its implications for organizational cost/priority. Laukkanen *et. al.* posits that regardless of the size of the organization, a focus on customers with great intentionality would have a huge payoff.⁵

Today there is another element at play which goes beyond the consumer as an individual and focuses more on societal values. In this model, the organization determines which social values are important in society overall and makes effort to highlight how they offer those values. Table 1 captures the essence of the shift in marketing from a production focus to a product/service focus to our current focus on values.

Table 1

Marketing Focus	Shifts in Marketing Focus ⇌⇌⇌		
	Production	Product/Service	Values
Goal	Efficiency	Unique product	Higher societal values
Technique	Machines/speed	Consumer testing	Shared vision
Emphasis	Quantity	Differentiation	Brand as authority

What we see occurring is a movement – especially with consumer-based companies – where marketers recognize that having a product consumers love is no longer enough. Instead, brands need to demonstrate a long-term commitment to ensuring their values align with their customers. In essence, companies have become authorities regarding ideals, values and morals. The firm has become more than a vessel for products; they are now vessels for ideals.

While the move to a higher level (vs. product focus) is not inherently bad, it does raise the question whether the consumer should really be a person to be revered and catered to. Does it not confer some sort of an idol status on the consumer? According to Alemany, modern consumers are as politically and socially conscious as ever, and they want organizations to take a stand on social and political issues.⁶ Brands now need to prove their credibility to customers. What this means is that the values brands tout are the ones that will make people feel good. Some of these values are contrary to the values that God honors. In a postmodern world, where truth is relative, the “truth” advanced by companies becomes the truth that people follow. Often, these are the same “truths” that support the consumers’ self-interests.

The Self in Marketing

Focus on the Self

The field of psychology has much to say about the self. Experts assert that there are two kinds of “self-awareness” – the objective and the subjective. Objective self-awareness arises from our comparisons of attitudes, traits, behaviors, or looks between ourselves and others, or to perceived standards.⁷ For example, when told to dress business casual to attend an event, one may have an idea of what is expected. Typically, one would double check in the mirror and make adjustments on their self-aware observation. On the other hand, subjective self-awareness arises from our observation and experience that we are the source of perceptions and behaviors.⁸ An example of this would be setting one’s own standard of business casual and not scrutinizing the choice of clothing based on what one feels is the expected, objective standard.

While some of us may question how objective any of us can really be about ourselves, the definition reminds us that the “self” is fluid in its standard – me compared to you, or me compared to some idealized notion of “truth.” Either way, it has some obvious flaws that we will discuss later.

The Concept of Self – Social Media

The rise of social media has taken the concept of self and turned it on its head. Consumers seem to be preoccupied with creating an image of themselves for the world to see. Over the years of working in the corporate landscape and studying consumer behavior, the authors have observed that consumers’ actual perception of themselves can be overtaken by how they desire to be perceived by others. This desire then seems to act as the rudder of the ship, giving it greater power in what they post and talk about online. This power can then become an obsession and hold great importance in how they make decisions.

As consumers seek to mold their personal identity, brands are coming alongside to assist them in this endeavor. How one thinks or feels about themselves has been termed one’s self-concept. Consumers will often use brands to find meaning and help display to themselves and to others who they are. Everyone has several self-concepts that can be identified. According to Babin & Harris there are six different “selves” which can emerge at any time:⁹

- Actual self – One’s current perception of who they are
- Ideal self – One’s perception of how they would like to be in the future
- Social self – One’s perception of how others see them
- Ideal social self – One’s perception of how they would like to be seen by others
- Possible self – One’s perception of what they could be
- Extended self – One’s perception of who they are based on the products they possess and consume

Brands, whether intentional or not, are assisting consumers who are seeking to define who they are by what they consume. Burkley *et. al.* discusses how a person’s self-concept is integrated into who they see themselves to be through a process called fusion.¹⁰ Fusion is the idea that a consumer will take a product that they use/consume and integrate it into their lives in a way that fuses it to their identity. The deeper the fusion, the more they identify the product as being who they are. According to the authors, “Fusion extends far beyond physical objects and can involve abstract thoughts, goals, or even other people.”¹¹ Perhaps this explains the rise of influencers, with consumers attaching themselves (fusing themselves) to these influencers they perceive to be the standard by which they aim to live.

Brands seem to go through this same process of defining who they are by their brand images, messaging, and by aligning with certain social causes. Their own fusing to ideas, social goals, and people (celebrity endorsers) are intentionally designed to reach their target audience and create their brand persona. The intent is to infuse in the mind of the consumer that the brand adds value to the consumers’ lives and that the brand can be trusted. Both the brand and the customer are seeking to create their own image of how they want to be perceived.

Self-Reference Effect

Another element of the self-focus preoccupation is called the self-reference effect. As an aspect of processing information, individuals process memories and interpret information by tying it back to themselves. Think about it, when you are handed a photo that you are in, who is the first person you look for to view? According to Rogers *et. al.*, people are always relating to the world in terms of themselves.¹² We consume information with keen attention to how that information will help us without regard to its implications for others. Marketers are aware of this phenomenon

and tie their brand to a concept that relates to the individual's interest so that the individual feels more connected to their brand. Self-reference effects remind us that the self is a rich and powerful encoder and integrator of information. It is an aspect of the human information-processing system, and the self appears to be highly involved in the processing.

With this preoccupation, we come to idolize ourselves – our bodies, our bank accounts, even our human relationships. This can then crowd out our desire to understand God better and ultimately lead us away from deferring to His wisdom in decision making and His sufficiency for our needs. Proverbs 28:26 reminds us that “Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool.” According to Scripture, this person is cursed: “Thus says the LORD: ‘Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD’” (Jeremiah 17:5).

God's Views on Self-Obsession

We are submerged in a culture in the Western world that is obsessed with the self. We talk about the importance of self-care, read books on how to self-improve, and then spend time on self-reflection. We are surrounded by the “self,” and culture has made discovering our true self and crafting our own self-identity as the new idols of the day.

Paul warns us of this self-focus in Philippians 2:3, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” Ambition is defined in Merriam-Webster as, “an ardent desire for rank, fame, or power . . . desire to achieve a particular end . . . the object of ambition.”¹³ According to this definition, Paul's warning shows the self as the object of ambition, which we are to do nothing with. The Bible is clear on how God feels about anything taking His place in our minds and hearts. Exodus commands:

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. (20:3-6)

Habakkuk 2:18 reminds us of the futility of idols: “What profit is an idol when its maker has shaped it, a metal image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in his own creation when he makes speechless idols!” The severity of this one truth should cause all Christians to ask the Lord to search their hearts and show them where they may be off track. We all need to recalibrate our hearts on a regular basis (Psalm 139:23-24). In the New Testament, the issue of idols continues to be front and center. John appeals to his readers in 1 John 5:21, “Little children, keep yourself from idols.” This is an interesting verse to consider how one might do this when they themselves are the idols. Paul takes the concept of idolatry and links it with any form of covetousness: “For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God” (Ephesian 5:5). When did something good that one may desire suddenly become an idol? It happens in the heart. What really is our desire? Is it to exalt oneself or to exalt our God?

Marketing seeks to promote products and make their audience aware of the need their product addresses – which ultimately is useful and helps others live well. However, is there a line that can be crossed beyond awareness to actually planting seeds of covetousness in the heart of the audience? Does the marketer hold any responsibility in cultivating seeds of discontent and covetousness? For instance, fear of missing out (FOMO) is a phenomenon that was originally thought to be constructed from inside the individual. FOMO refers to the feeling that others have something you don't or may have the opportunity to experience something you might miss out on. With the development of social

media, this phenomenon has gone beyond the personal sphere of friends and family. Marketers intentionally seek to create this feeling that you cannot be without their product or you truly would be missing out. Commercial marketers have taken a feeling that used to be reserved for close family and friends - missing out on an outing or get-together – to feature it in advertising. Their objective is to activate this negative emotion in consumers in order to increase their likelihood of making a purchase.¹⁴

Today, many brands have openly flaunted a strategy which seeks to enhance the self-worth of their customers (when you use their products). Some examples:

- “Because you're worth it” (L'Oreal);
- “You deserve it” (Mercedes-Benz);
- “You too can be extraordinary, if you eat our beef jerky” (Chomps);
- “You can be unstoppable” (Always Feminine Products);
- “You too can be a muse, if you wear our jewelry” (Pandora); and
- “You are unlimited” (Yogi Tea Bags).

So how do believers who feel the Lord is leading them to the field of marketing navigate their vocation in a way that honors God? To adopt a line from Elizabeth Elliott - The fact that I am a marketer does not make me a different kind of Christian, but the fact that I am a Christian makes me a different kind of marketer. Marketing is a creative process. Francis Schaeffer reminds us that the Lordship of Christ over the whole of life means that there are no platonic areas in Christianity, no dichotomy or hierarchy between the body and the soul. God made the body as well as the soul and redemption is for the whole man. Evangelicals have been legitimately criticized for often being so tremendously interested in seeing souls get saved and go to heaven that they have not cared much about the whole man.¹⁵

The Lord is Lord over all – culture and creativity. Could marketing be one of the ways believers use their skills and God-given creativity to bless the world? We believe the answer is a resounding, Yes! Schaeffer’s four standards of judgement for art can be applied to the discipline of marketing: *technical excellence, validity, intellectual content/worldview, and integration of content/vehicle*.¹⁶

First, we need to ask - is it an excellent piece of work? This can include the format chosen, the colors and any technical aspects to the work. Second, is the marketer creating a piece of work that would align with his/her Christian worldview or is he/she creating a campaign “only for money or for the sake of being accepted”?¹⁷ The third criterion has to do with the actual content produced. As a Christian marketer, does the work reflect truths from Scripture? Would it align with the truths of God’s Word? God is our ultimate judge of the work that we produce. Would he alone be pleased? Finally, the fourth criterion looks at how well the marketer “has suited the vehicle to the message.”¹⁸ Does the content fit the style that was chosen to display it?

Since the 1970s organizations have spent much resources on ways to connect with consumers as they investigate their needs and interests. This focus on “what do people want” is a burning question for the marketer as they try to woo their target customers to prefer their brand. In essence, they want customers to feel empowered to do more with their lives through their unique brands. The concern here is not that marketers should ignore consumers’ emotional connections to the brand. In fact, on the contrary, God has designed us with emotions and a great need to connect with others. The quest for an ethical marketer is to seek ways where they can, through their work, enhance the consumer’s life and not to lead them down roads that can lead to dissatisfaction with themselves. Often the values the brand promises are good, yet Satan could take what is good and true and twists it in ways that deceive and blur our vision.

What Difference Can a Christian Marketer Make?

So how can Christian marketers faithfully serve God, contribute to their organizations, and care for their customers? First, they must actually be in the room where the decisions are being made. They then have the opportunity to keep the whole being of their target consumer in mind. This then provides space for entrepreneurial thinking to take place in the promotion of the brands they are responsible for. It is unlikely that the 1950s' approach of demonstrating the capability of the product alone can be very effective in luring today's sophisticated consumers. Hagenbuch advocates for the need for Christians to be in the field of marketing to go about their work in such a way that they could be considered a "mindful marketer."¹⁹ He points out that, as marketers, before we can have others listen to our ideas, we need to be good at what we do to earn the respect of our colleagues. Once we have earned their respect, we have a greater opportunity for our ethical reasoning to be given credence. His top ten suggestions for a Christian marketer are to:

1. Adopt a model for moral decision-making
2. Keep ethics top-of-mind
3. Know the laws of your industry and organization
4. Commit yourself to making moral choices
5. Have others keep you accountable
6. Have moral sounding boards
7. Keep learning
8. Sweat the little things
9. Decide before you need to decide
10. Ask questions²⁰

In earlier writings, Hagenbuch advocated for the overarching biblical principle of the Golden Rule to lay the foundation for any marketing effort:

Treat others the way that you want to be treated, or as Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31). In following this one principle, Christian marketers will also uphold several other important mandates effectively, for instance, thinking long-term, considering all parties affected by one's actions, and putting people ahead of things."²¹

Hagenbuch went on to remind his readers that whether our vocation is in the field of marketing, we are all involved in marketing to some extent: "While individuals may not market products in the commercial sense, they do market their personal services and ideas."²² We may add, with the advent of social media, we market our personal brand on a daily basis to all who interact with us.

To have a seat at the table with a valued voice to their team, marketers who want to contribute well need to consistently do their homework. There are three areas for this focus: the brand, the competitors, and the target audience.

- The brand: How does the target customer view the brand? Does this align with the brand's view of what they think they are communicating? What does the brand want to communicate? What value is the brand bringing? What does the brand offer that competitors do not?
- The competitors: Who are the competitors and what advantages do they have in the marketplace? How is the competitive product viewed by the target audience? What does our brand offer that is lacking in the competition?
- The target audience: Who is the target audience? What motivates them? What do they value? How can they best be reached?

Whether we are sharing godly truth or a good branding campaign, a powerful impact can be made when Christian marketers have earned the respect of all who share in the outcome of the effort!

Conclusion

Christian marketers need to be asking the question of whether – and how – the way they represent brands advances human flourishing and honors God. We live in an age of relativism, yet we also know that humans are always hungry for absolutes and boundaries. God designed humanity to honor Him and to love one another, not to place anything, including the human self, above our love for God. Tim Keller describes an idol as “Anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.”²³ Christian marketers can help safeguard the boundary between godly and idol worship in the battle for the human heart in the consumption space. It requires discernment, vigilance, and diligence, and it has become critically more important in an age of postmodernism.

About the Authors



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